AN APOCALYPTIC ADJECTIVE

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In ancient Jewish and Christian apocalypses one may detect a distinctive style, syntax and vocabulary. Among these linguistic characteristics is a fondness for using the adjective great, megas. One symptom of this frequency is the fact that almost half of its New Testament occurrences are found in the Book of Revelation. (In his article in Kittel, W. Grundmann virtually ignored the Apocalypse). The time may not be wasted if we review John’s use of this adjective. We may find, among other things, that profound meanings often lurk behind the simplest words. In the case of adjectives which are easiest to translate it may be most difficult to convey the full range of original connotations.

The problem of translation appears to be easy, indeed, in the twenty cases where this adjective megas describes voices or sounds (phonai). For seventeen of these RSV reads loud (i 10, v 2, 12, vi 10, vii 2, 10, viii 13, x 3, xi 12, 15, xii 10, xiv 7, 9, 15, 18, xvi 1, xix 17). In two cases the translators preferred great (xvi 17, xxi 3) and in one mighty (xix 1). It is difficult to know the reasons for this preference. In contrast to loud, do great and mighty intimate the presence of dignity and even a trace of pomposity in the voice? Or is this usage merely an archaism? Or is the mightiness of a sound less measurable in decibels than its loudness? When one examines the contexts, it is difficult to locate any such contrasts in the use of the Greek adjective.

Those contexts, however, render all three English equivalents quite inadequate. This is due in part to the origin of the sounds or voices. In all cases the noise emanates from heaven, from the realm which is by nature inaudible. It is the voice of angels (v 2, 12), of martyrs and saints (vi 10, xix 1), of the eagle (viii 13) of Christ or God (i 10, xi 12, xvi 1, xxi 3). It marks the intrusion of the numinous, the transcendent, into the prophet’s consciousness. It is the sign of encounter with the heavenly realm, which with
momentous words or climactic actions disrupts the ordinary human situation. On at least four occasions these phonai are conjoined to such phenomena as thunder, lightning, hail, earthquake (iv 5, viii 5, ix 19, xvi 18), yet this cacophony is restricted within the bounds of the prophet's vision. In this context the function of megas is not so much a gauge of the loudness of the sound as its intensity, its pervasiveness, its dramatic force. What is taking place takes place on the level of God's fateful (but inaudible) dialogue with his people. Megas suggests the momentous reverberations of God's action vis-a-vis his people.

Megas also points to the action of demonic and babylonic realities. Here again qualitative nuances displace the reference to quantitative components. On fourteen occasions, the adjective is used to describe Babylon, whether as the city (xi 8, xiv 8, xvi 19, xvii 5, 18, xviii 2, 10, 16, 17, 19, 21) or as the harlot (xvii 1, xix 2). Why is megale so appropriate in this connection? Surely not simply because of the city's size. Rather, because Babylon is a mystery (xvii 5), the home of demons (xviii 2), the mother of earth's abominations (xvii 5), the corrupter of society, who exercises dominion over earth's kings (xvii 18; xix 2), the harlot who makes all nations drunk (xiv 8). Babylon transcends space and time, for it embraces such diverse places as Sodom, Egypt, and the holy city which kills its prophets (xi 8). This last reference makes clear that this is a reality which requires pneumatic interpretation. As used in connection with Babylon the adjective calls the reader to be alert to many unusual things about this city, including its demonic megalomania (xiii 5). Its power is such as to release fascination and dread (ethamasa...thauma, xviii 6). Its mysterious presence haunts all communities—the many waters of 17:1 (cf. H. G. May, Journal of Biblical Literature 74 (1955) 9-21).

An adjective which is thus germane to the extraordinary character of both the divine and the satanic kingdoms becomes even more germane in depicting the invisible collisions between those kingdoms and especially their imagined climax in the day of the Lord (vi 17, xvi 14). That "day of days" would see the long-delayed enforcement of God's justice in the great winepress (xiv 19). The plagues which are released at the Lord's command (xvi 21), the furnace which belches smoke from the abyss (ix 2), the chain which binds the dragon for a millenium (xx 1), the dinner where vultures gorge themselves, (xx 17) the hailstones falling heavily on heads (xvi 21),